KNOWING WHOM TO TRUST

June 30, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Job 38:1-11
Mark 4:35-41

"...Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"
-Mark 4:40 (NRSV)

Are you in that boat? Is your life our of control? Are you bouncing around in waves and words generated somewhere else? Is your life subject to forces over which you have no influence?

I recently read a professionally prepared market study which focused on the emotional and spiritual needs of urban adults. The study documented the notion, which people who analyze urban life have always observed, namely that for city people there seem to be huge, anonymous and threatening forces which have a major impact on the way we live, the way we feel about the way we live, and over which we have very little control. The report provided several familiar examples:

- a new job or an evolving career which seems often to be in the hands of someone else, a supervisor, a committee, the market, or blind fate;.
- starting up new relationships, social and romantic;
- being alone and responsible for one's own care and welfare;
- raising a family in an urban environment.
- and then the simple reality of city life, noise, crowds, pollution and crime.

Dave Barry wrote a very funny piece for the Chicago Tribune a while ago about the differences between suburbanites and urbanites. Urbanites walk everywhere... If you walk in suburbia, people look at you cautiously and assume there is either something wrong with you or with your car. Suburbanites go to the movies for excitement. Urban life is like living in the middle of a movie. Suburbanites, he said, worry about things like the price of cauliflower. Urbanites wonder if they are going to be assaulted by the person sitting beside them on the subway, or if they will actually survive the taxi ride.

For all of us - urban, suburban, rural - life often feels out of control, or that we are up against huge forces that we are powerless to influence. The verbatim part of the market study was poignant.

> "I have a lot of job stress. I work in a big, corporate law firm. Lots of lawyers, caught up in the same problems.
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> "I've got new responsibilities. My job forces me to deal with a lot of stress and hard decisions."
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> "The world becomes more complicated and more confusing. There's more to deal with. (I need) an anchor or a resource to help navigate."
>
> "It's hard facing life alone."
>
> "The future's uncertain. I live alone - no roommate. I don't want to stay in Chicago more than a few years."

I suppose there are not many of us who have not felt on occasion that our lives are out of control. And my guess is that there are some of us who feel that way all the time. To live and move and have being in Chicago this summer is to be acutely aware of personal impotence in trying to get from one place to another. Driving across town, or to the airport, or down Michigan Avenue this summer is no small project - requiring planning, a creative strategy, nerves of steel and, of course, patience.

Dr. Herbert Benson who teaches at Harvard Medical School and who wrote a classic and helpful manual on stress management says:

> "Most of us find that we are helpless in solving the big problems. We have some vague hope that the leaders we elect (and the experts they rely on) can find the solutions. But our concern usually involves everyday difficulties. Our frustrations come about because we generally can't even solve the less earth-shaking problems, such as being on time to work in a large congested city. Indeed, the every day demands of living make it more and more difficult to escape the increasingly adverse psychological effects that seem built into our existence." [The Relaxation Response, p. 17]

So, may I propose that the question before many of us, maybe even the question that motivated us to be here in this building at this hour, is this: Where can we find something to hold on to? Where can we find an anchor, or a navigator, at a time in life when we feel out of control, when it feels like our lives are buffeted, pushed and pulled by huge and not necessarily benevolent forces, who can we trust with our future?

It was a question foremost on the minds of a small group of people who pushed off from shore one evening long ago in a fishing boat. Students

of literature tell us that this story, which occurs in the Books of Matthew, Mark and Luke, has the feel of an eye witness account. Someone told this story who was there. In any event, the small group of men and women had been intrigued and then captivated by Jesus of Nazareth. They had accompanied him as he walked from village to village in Galilee and had watched and listened as the people came to him, as the crowds grew in size. Why, that very day so many had come that Jesus had stood in a boat, a few yards out in the water and standing there in the stern, he had taught them. As the sun settled in the west, the crowds had shown no signs of dissipating. It was Jesus who said, "Let's go to the other side," The significance of that suggestion is that the other side was not part of the bargain. The other side was new and unknown territory. Galilee was home; the people in the crowds were neighbors and friends. The people on the other side were strangers. Many of them were gentiles. Besides, it was one thing to walk around Galilee with him. It's another thing altogether to hop in a boat and head out for a new shore trusting him with their future. This thing is getting out of control.

And so, with understandable misgiving, with doubt and some fear, they set the sail and pushed off into the light breeze of early evening. Jesus was soon asleep. That body of water is 600 feet below sea level and the surrounding hills function like a funnel for the prevailing breezes from the Mediterranean. Sudden and fairly violent squalls are common and that's exactly what happened in the dark of night. A small boat in a squall, with the sail up and the waves crashing over the prow is a very busy place. People are bailing frantically, hauling in the sail, securing oars and water and food, struggling with the tiller, and holding on for dear life. So it is not idle curiosity which prompts one of them to shake him and ask, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" That's far too soft - it was a panicked scream: "For God's sake Jesus, we're going down, at least get awake and lend a hand!"

And then, the strangest thing happened. He got awake, looked around, said: "Peace! Be still...!" And there has always been a suspicion that he was talking to them - those terrified people. In any event, the squall subsided and so did they apparently.

Now, the interesting thing about that story is that the early Christians told it first to non-believers, pagans, as a kind of attention-getting, sensationalist documentary about Jesus' power. It's almost impossible for Twentieth Century people to understand how First Century people regarded nature and natural processes. Quickly - nature, they believed, was inhabited by spirits - good and evil. Ancient people believed that nature was the battle ground for a primal conflict between the forces of order and stability - God and the forces of chaos - destruction, evil. The occult, still the theological system of choice for millions of people, still very big business, still influential in critical decisions in high places, is based on that ancient superstition. Bodies of water, in the ancient world, were frightening, places where terrifying creatures lived. Recall those ancient maps with pictures of dragons on the perimeters and the warning "monsters here"? The oceans are a threat to the land; floods are always attempting to overcome and destroy human life and civilization. So when the Bible says God separated the water and created dry land in Genesis 1, and that God speaks out of the whirlwind as

Job proclaims, and that the earth is the Lord's, as the Psalmist declared, and that Jesus calms the storm, it is making a very important theological assertion in the ancient world... Nature is God's creation. It is not the enemy. Nature is God's gift. God's authority and power are sovereign even over nature.

That's a troublesome idea for us in a way it was not for pre-scientific people. That God controls and uses storms and floods and volcanos is difficult for many of us to argue, or believe. Its implications are appalling. Whatever God's relationship to nature is, it does not, in my estimation, include the use of nature in ways that are harmful and destructive to life. When those things happen, when a tornado rips through a subdivision, or a volcano erupts, or floods devastate a nation, or cells begin to destroy other cells in a human body, it is not because of divine will or intent, but natural processes and cosmological accidents. God's sovereignty over nature is a critical notion as we explore our relationship to the natural world - which we have turned into a kind of ecological warfare. But it is not to suggest, nor is it the point of this story that if you ask Jesus he will intervene in nature on your behalf.

The second use to which the early Christians put this story, and the more important one by far, was to encourage and comfort one another in times of threat and distress and danger. They told the story to one another whenever things seemed out of control.

"Lord, don't you care that we are perishing?" they must have said and listened to the disciples say to Jesus.

"In times of tumult and grave danger," one Biblical scholar observes, "a natural human reaction is to wonder whether or not there is a God, and if so, whether God is even aware of my problem. We cry out to God in the midst of the storm, 'Don't you care?'" [Interpretation, Mark, p. 102]

I suppose each of us could recall a time when we asked that. Robert Coles, the Harvard psychiatrist who wrote the best seller, The Spiritual Lives of Children, interviewed ten-year-old Margarita, who with six brothers and sisters lived in a Brazilian slum and whose mother was dying of tuberculosis at the time Coles asked what she thought about when she looked up and saw that statue of Christ in the Andes with the outstretched arms. Her face lit up. She said, "I want to scream. I get angry at him. I go and tell him off. 'Why are you going to take her, what has she done to deserve death? Don't tell me, as the priest does, that she'll go to heaven.' All of us here can't eat off our mother's life in heaven."

"What does Jesus say back to you?" Coles asked, and was surprised at the answer he received. "He'll say, 'Margarita, you are looking too far ahead. First try to get to the evening, the sunset; then try to get to the morning, the sunrise!' When I hear him, I feel calmer... hearing him gives me something to hold on to." [p. 91-93]

Madeleine L'Engle has written a moving account of her husband's critical illness, their long and productive relationship, and his death. About a particularly difficult time when things were going very badly, when

the best medical procedures were no longer helping and when Hugh's body, as she put it, was betraying him in every possible way, she wrote:

> "I will have nothing to do with a God who cares only occasionally. I need a God who is with us always, everywhere, in the deepest depths as well as the highest heights. It is when things go wrong, when the good things do not happen, when our prayers seem to be lost, that God is most present. We do not need the sheltering wings when things go smoothly. We are closest to God in the darkness, stumbling along blindly." [Two-Part Invention, p. 124]

Ann Lamott

What those people learned that night in the middle of the storm is that Jesus is in the boat with them, experiencing their terror and doubt and fear, and that somehow his commitment to them gives them the strength and courage and confidence they need to make it through the night.

Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, the sense of life being out of control, contribute to some very bad decisions sometimes.

Sometimes we feel so out of control that we sell out to someone or something who promises structure, certainty, predictability. The classic studies of totalitarianism and fascism all conclude that when freedom leads to unrelenting fear and anxiety, it loses its value and people will happily trade it for an authority that promises security and a stable currency and trains that run on time.

Norman Cousins worried that the threat of nuclear war tapped into the primal fear of non-being in all of us and would ultimately drive us to seek relief, if not in authoritarian political structures, then in the anesthesia of drugs and alcohol.

On a personal level, people who believe their lives are out of control often make unhealthy choices about relationships, or jobs, or life-styles, or drugs, often turn personal autonomy into unhealthy dependency.

The G. Heileman Brewing Co. knows that a malt liquor called "Power-Master" will have enormous appeal in a sub-culture with the highest unemployment, where men feel absolutely powerless, and totally at the disposal of economic, social and political forces over which they have no control.

Fear of the future makes for bad decisions. It also paralyzes. It always suggests that the past was a better place than the future can be, that new, unexplored places are to be avoided at all costs, that new ventures are frightening and threatening.

In the middle of a storm the friends of Jesus learned that they could trust him, trust him to be with them in the present: trust him with the crossing over to a new and uncharted future.

They learned, that is to say, who he is.

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They did not, by the way, receive a promise that if they trusted him there would be no more storms. The best part of the story is that after the storm, after they have been quieted, they are filled with great awe. They're still afraid, maybe more so now. But it's a fear grounded in hope. It's a high and holy exhilaration, I think, knowing that he will lead them into new places, new ventures, new life and that he will always be with them.

There is something out there ahead for each of us: a professional challenge, a job that needs doing, a task calling for more than you have ever produced: a personal challenge, a relationship which is risky, and demands more of yourself than you have ever given. There are people to love, forgive, care for; there are fences to mend, or exams to take, or addictions and dependencies to battle... for all of us regardless of who we are or how young or old - a future ahead that can and often does look frightening indeed.

And the invitation which came that night long ago, in a little boat in the middle of a storm, comes to you, here and now. It is very simple and very profound. It is the essence of our faith.

Count on him.

Put your future in his hands.

Trust him.

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God eternal, there are many times when our lives seem out of control. Come to us; bring your calm and give us your peace and grant us that confidence in the Lord of the future... who, in love and mercy, rules over all; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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